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## Should anthropologists help US military in Iraq, Afghanistan wars?

Embedding anthropologists with US military in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is both praised and derided by academics as violating a social scientist's basic pledge: to do no harm.



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Baquba, Iraq —

When the military began an experimental program in 2007 to give soldiers a better understanding of cultural sensitivities in Iraq and Afghanistan, many in the military and the media lauded it as a great step forward in the counterinsurgency effort.

Called the Human Terrain System (HTS), the program embeds anthropologists and social scientists in the US military to give soldiers vital local context for shaping their operations. But a group of anthropologists quickly attacked the nascent program, saying that partnering social scientists with combat forces caused them to violate the principal rule of anthropology: to do no harm. By working directly with frontline soldiers, some anthropologists worry that the information generated by HTS social scientists can be used to facilitate potentially lethal military operations or otherwise endanger locals.

Today the program enjoys a core of supporters, but it's done little to address the concerns of anthropologists and, now, rising military complaints that the program has slowed the growth of the military's ability to train culturally sensitive warriors. At a time when the military's ability to conduct counterinsurgency is vital to the success of its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, determining the value of a program like HTS is increasingly important.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, US military leaders began placing increased importance on understanding local cultures and viewpoints as a critical component of their mission. The question for it is whether HTS helps or hurts that goal.

**Lack of empirical measurement on usefulness**

"I wish I could say I've seen something that made me feel better [about HTS], but I haven't," says Hugh Gusterson, a professor of anthropology and sociology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., who has had concerns about the program since its inception.

This spring, US Marine Maj. Ben Connable voiced concerns that the program was hurting the military's ability to develop what he termed "cultural intelligence training programs" in an article published in the Military Review.

"HTS has sapped the attention or financing from nearly every cultural program in the military and from many within the military intelligence community," wrote Connable, who argued that although the military lacked cultural intelligence abilities in the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they've since improved in this regard.

Other critics point to the difficulty of determining the value of HTS due to the lack of empirical evidence about its performance. At the present time, the program does not track statistics about its impact. As a result, David Price, a longtime opponent of the program and co-author of "The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual," says it's impossible for anyone to objectively measure its merit.

"I want to see some external results here and they're not doing it. It's a boondoggle," he says.

### **Anecdotal results support social scientists**

But the social scientists out doing the work say the anecdotal results they see day to day are clear enough. Ahead of the US withdrawal from urban areas in Iraq last summer, for example, Kathleen Reedy and the other social scientists on her team spent nearly a week speaking with Iraqis about their attitudes toward and concerns about the withdrawal. While US soldiers had short conversations with locals about these issues, Reedy and her colleagues spent 30 minutes to an hour speaking with each individual.

As a result, they were able to paint a picture of the situation that allowed the soldiers they were with to address concerns and avoid some major missteps.

The project also took a hit this year when a technical change of the status of HTS researchers – from contractors to government employees – also reduced salaries by up to 50 percent. After the change, which the military says was designed to protect HTS researchers after the new Iraqi security agreement went into effect, 32 percent of deployed social scientists quit.

The anthropologist oath – to do no harm – was put to the test in November 2008 after one member of a human terrain team in Afghanistan pleaded guilty to manslaughter for shooting a man. The Afghan had thrown gasoline on his HTS team member Paula Lloyd and set her on fire. Ms. Lloyd died from her injuries.

But although these incidents and the continuous stream of criticism from academics has dogged the program since its inception, they have also been useful in developing applied research training techniques for those working with the military, says Montgomery McFate, senior social scientist for HTS. But she adds that many critics fail to understand the nature of the work.

### **Many soldiers call program useful**

"Many of the concerns raised by academic anthropologists reflected a lack of knowledge about the role and mission of US armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, a lack of understanding about the population of Iraq and Afghanistan and the conditions under which they live, and a set of preconceived ideas about the mission or goals of HTS fed by anxieties about the military's historic use of anthropological knowledge during prior conflicts, including the British colonial period," Dr. McFate wrote The Christian Science Monitor in an e-mail.

Within the military there are a number of soldiers who say the program has become an indispensable resource. US Army Capt. Joey Williams has focused much of his attention on understanding counterinsurgency operations. He often escorted Human Terrain Teams (HTT) in Iraq's Diyala Province to help them conduct surveys of the locals, and says he learned a lot from working with them.

"The difference between HTT and us is that the HTT is very highly trained in counterinsurgency cultural studies," he says. "HTT is more focused on the big picture, like, 'How do we analyze this culture and this society so that we can apply these fundamentals of counterinsurgency to this area?' "

Social scientist Reedy, who has worked closely with Williams, says that soldiers often tell her that they appreciate the ability of HTS to put what would otherwise been seen as isolated incidents together to find patterns that can then explain a situation on a broader scale.

Despite the continuing questions surrounding the program, she says, she trusts that her work is ethically sound and sees it as her way of helping both Iraqis and Americans.

"The reality is [the war] happened and you can either sit by and do nothing or you can try to do something to help a little bit at least," she says. "But other people are of the opinion, and fair enough, that to be involved is to kind of be a part of the problem."

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*How the war in Iraq has shaped a new US military mind-set: [Read more here.](#)*



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